

Falls of the Neuse Manufacturing Plant
West bank of the Neuse River at SR 2000
Falls
Wake County
North Carolina

(HAER No. NC-18)

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historical American Engineering Record

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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Falls of the Neuse Manufacturing Plant

NC-18

Location: West bank of Neuse River at SR 2000, Falls, Wake County, North Carolina.

Date of Construction: 1854-1855

Present Owner: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
c/o Colonel Homer Johnstone
P.O. Box 1890
Wilmington, North Carolina 28401

Present Use: Vacant; to be demolished

Significance: The Falls of the Neuse Mill complex includes a massive 3-story granite building and a 1-story granite secondary building evidently built in 1854-1855 as the paper mill of the Manteo Manufacturing Company, organized by James F. Jordan. Secondary buildings survive from later stages of operation as paper and textile mills. Powered by water held in a 400-foot wide stone dam and conveyed by a millrace, the complex is strategically located at the natural falls of the Neuse River. The chief period of significance of the mill was its 1855-1896 operation as a paper mill. The mill was described in this era as the only significant producer of paper in eastern North Carolina and one of the largest in the state. Producing rag paper of high quality, the mill supplied state government and most eastern North Carolina printers.

In 1855 the mill at the Falls of the Neuse was described as a "massive stone building, two hundred and one feet long and fifty-five feet wide, two and a half stories high and . . . covered with a tin roof." At this time, too, a dam was described as 6 feet, 3 inches high, extending 400 feet across the river, backing up water for 10 miles. Supportive buildings also existed. Following a fire in 1871, reference was made to the large three-story building." In 1959 the main stone building was described as being three stories high, 54 feet wide, and 195 feet long. Despite the discrepancies in length and width, it seems likely that the "massive stone building" built of native granite in 1854-1855 is the shell of the great granite building that stands near the bank of the Neuse River today. It is part of an impressive milling complex active for over a century, with remains from its many phases of operations.

The *raison d'etre*, of course, for the operation is a natural feature, the falls of the great Neuse River. Upstream about 1,000 feet from the mill is a natural falls, formed of a smooth rock outcropping that extends across the wide river, about 400 feet wide at this point. To either side the terrain slopes upward fairly abruptly beyond the bottomland.

Taking advantage of the natural rock formation is the stone dam. It may be that which was built before 1855. About 400 feet wide and roughly 6 feet tall, it is an impressive stone construction. Quarried stone blocks of varying sizes form the long dam, which is topped by a rough coping. While the straight-forward construction--a simple vertical race on its downstream side--resembles the construction of the nineteenth century stone dams associated with grist mills on many of the tributaries of the Neuse, this one is notable for its exceptional span.

On the north end of the dam is the millrace. A stone pier defines a corner, and stone walls perpendicular to the dam form the race, which extends downstream (east) in an unbroken line for perhaps fifteen feet. At that point it is broken and the mill, a distance of perhaps 1,000 feet, there is evidence of the early millrace--trenches defined by earthen and stone walls--and of later repairs and perhaps rerouting of the race, including some walls of concrete and small stone rubble, one inscribed with an apparent date of 1922. There is also a concrete sluice gate. The entire area along the north bank is rich with evidence of former means of harnessing the power of the Neuse.

Above the flood plain, on the slope of the hill on the north side of the river, is the site of an eighteenth or early nineteenth century dwelling, said to have been the Miller's house, perhaps related to the pre-paper mill operation of the early nineteenth century.

Significance

The buildings at Falls of the Neuse in Wake County stand at the one of the oldest manufacturing sites in North Carolina. The location itself had attained a measure of historical significance long before its use as power source for various industrial enterprises. One of the first white visitors to this area of North Carolina, John Lawson, reported stopping "at the Falls of a large Creek, where lay mighty rocks, the water making a strange noise, as if a great many Water-Mills were going at once. I take this to be the Falls of Neus-Creek, called by the Indians Wee-quo-Whom.." ¹ This was in February 1701. It would be several years before the sound of "Water-Mills" was actually heard at the Falls. Local tradition holds that a powder-making factory operated at the Falls during the Revolutionary War. ²

The potential of the site attracted investment and construction; the earliest mill use is not known, but an operation was under way by 1835, as evident in the following advertisement which ran in the Raleigh Register on November 27, 1846, and again on January 15, 1847:

GREAT FALLS OF NEUSE RIVER. Important to Capitalists. The undersigned wishing to sell his property at this place, now offers for sale the Mill tract, containing one hundred and thirteen acres, on which is situated his Grist Mills, Saw Mills, Tan Yard, and Store House, etc. The Grist Mills are in a large house, sixty feet long and forty feet wide, and consists of three Corn Mills, and one pair of Burr Mill Stones, for grinding wheat, and with Smutt Mill Elevators, Bolting cloths, and all fixtures for making first rate flour. . . machinery . . . entirely new, having been put last year. . . The Tan Yard containing upwards of Twenty Vats . . . fixtures and tools.

The water power at this place is immense, embracing from head to foot a fall of upwards of thirty feet, and sufficient to run any amounts of machinery that might be desired . . . situated in a Cotton growing region, and within less than four miles of either Huntsville or Forestville Depots, on the Raleigh and Gaston Rail Road, and 13 miles North of Raleigh on the road leading to Oxford. I have owned this property since 1835, since which time these mills have never been stopped by either high or low water . . . devote most of my time to other pursuits. .

James D. Newsom, Forestville, Wake County.

The legislative records of North Carolina document the incorporation of the Neuse River Manufacturing Company in January 1851, for the purpose of manufacturing cotton, wool, iron, grain and other articles. ³ However, there is no further documentation for either of these industrial enterprises.

The first paper manufacturing of record at the Falls began in 1854. The Manteo Manufacturing Company, organized by James F. Jordan, had operated a paper-making concern on Crabtree Creek beginning in 1851. In 1854 Jordan sought the greater water power of the Falls of the Neuse and transferred his property to that location.⁴ In September, 1854, the Raleigh Register reported paying a visit to "the splendid Mills at present in progress of construction at the Falls of the Neuse in this County." This report described a sawmill, flour mill, and a paper mill, adding that:

the Paper Mills are built of substantial and beautiful granite, of which there is a very extensive quarry upon the spot. [The paper mills] are supplied with every convenience necessary to an establishment of the sort and the latest improvements have been consulted in their construction. When completed (which will be in a few weeks) they will be fitted up with the most perfect machinery now employed in paper-making.

The report concluded with an evaluation of the company and its ownership: "The owners are men of enterprise and improvement, . . . the enterprise . . . will certainly prove a public blessing. The benefits . . . are already visible in the air of business which prevails there."⁵

Despite these optimistic projections, Jordan's company failed to prosper. Ownership of the property was transferred to Daniel G. Fowle as trustee for the Manteo Manufacturing Company. In December, 1855, Fowle announced the sale of the property which included the paper mill, described as a "massive stone building, two hundred and one feet long and fifty-five feet wide, two and a half stories high, and . . . covered with a tin roof." The mill was equipped with four steam engines" of great power," one Rotary Boiler, one Fourdiner machine" of excellent quality," all driven by Blake water wheels under a head of water 18 feet high. The power was created by a dam which extended about 400 feet across the river. This dam was 6 feet, 3 inches in height and backed up the river for about 10 miles. The mill race was 1,000 feet long, 14 feet wide, and about 5 feet deep. It was estimated that as much as 300 horsepower could be created at this site. The stone mill produced 3,400 pounds of paper each day. The water power also operated a grist mill (40 feet long and 32 feet wide, four stories, with three pairs of stones each driven by a Blake water wheel) and a sawmill. There was also a large stock house, an office, a blacksmith's shop, a carpenter's shop, and eleven houses for operatives at the site. The entire mill property covered 369 acres.⁶

The property was purchased by William R. Poole in 1856 and the name of the company changed to the Forest Manufacturing Company.⁷ Poole continued to produce paper at this site, one of five paper making factories in operation in North Carolina as of 1860. The Forest Manufacturing Company employed nineteen men and twelve women, producing 52,000 pounds of rag paper annually.⁸ The mill apparently operated for some time during the Civil War but was dismantled when General Sherman's army approached the Raleigh area. According to a history of Wake County (1920), the machinery was hidden and saved. Sherman's army somehow overlooked the mill at Falls although it did set fire to a small paper mill at Milburnie and a powder plant at Crabtree Creek.⁹

Following the war the mill resumed operation as the Foreset Manufacturing Company under the direction of William B. Allegre.¹⁰ Allegre continued to operate the sawmill and flour mill at the site. The paper mill then had a daily capacity of 3 1/2 tons and was powered by a Blake waterwheel developing only 40 horsepower out of the potential 300 horsepower. The labor force consisted of twenty men, ten women, and two children.¹¹

Allegre's success was short-lived, however. On March 21, 1871, the Raleigh Sentinel reported,

The paper mill of the Forest Manufacturing Company near Forestville was totally destroyed by fire on Sunday night. We have not ascertained the amount of loss, but understand it to be covered by \$15,000 insurance.

Two previous attempts were made to fire this property but were fortunately frustrated. On this occasion the flames had gained such headway before being discovered that nothing could be done to extinguish them.

Since the foregoing was written we learn that only about one half of the paper mill was burnt, and that the loss is some \$20,000, with a small amount of insurance. The mill is owned by Mr. W. B. Allegre and W. F. Askew.

On March 24, the Sentinel followed up the story:

The proprietors of the Forestville Paper Mill (Messrs. W. B. Allegre and W. F. Askew) in the destruction of one half of their paper mill, at the Falls of the Neuse, by fire, on last Sunday night about one o'clock, are actual losers (sic) to the amount of \$10,500 on their stock and fixtures and \$10,000 on their large three story building. They are insured for only \$10,000, one-third in each of the following companies: Albermarle Insurance Co., of Charlottesville, Va.; National Fire Insurance Co., of Baltimore, Md.; and the Merchants and Mechanics Fire Insurance Co. of Baltimore, Md.

It is not certain precisely what was the effect of the fire upon the massive three-story stone building, but the description of "only half the paper mill" being "burnt," the nature of the construction, the similarity of the present building to that described, plus the reference in deed (below) to the mills suggest that the shell of the great three-story stone building survived the blaze. Allegre's investment, however, was not so lucky, for within less than two months he sold out his interest in the operation to William F. Askew. On May 4, 1871, Allegre sold his entire interest to Askew for \$10,000 and a covenant by Askew to "pay all the outstanding liabilities of the Forest Manufacturing Company . . . amounting . . . to about \$7,798.49. Allegre's interest in the company included 329 acres at the Falls of the Neuse "whereupon are the mills (Paper, Grist and Saw) of said Company," plus "10 mules, 1 horse, 5 wagons and harness, forty thousand pounds of Rags; a lot of paper estimated to be worth \$2,000, the money (\$10,000) due for the insurance of the property of said Company recently destroyed by fire," about \$9,800 in debts due the company, and about \$4,000 upon deposit to the credit of the company.¹²

William F. Askew soon put the mill back in working order. He had been a wealthy slavetrader before the Civil War but lost his fortune as a result of the defeat of the Confederacy. He developed the Falls paper mill into a well-respected and profitable producer of paper goods. In 1872 Askew reincorporated the paper mill company as the Falls of the Neuse Manufacturing Company.¹³ He and his wife Harriet sold to the Falls of the Neuse Manufacturing Company the property bought of Allegre, plus improvements for \$45,834.29. While Askew retained control of the everyday operations, financial and corporate control of the company rested with Rufus Y. McAden, George W. Swepson, and George Rosenthal, all prominent entrepreneurs of Raleigh.¹⁴

For many years Askew's paper mill ran at less than full capacity. The industrial census of 1880 noted that the mill was in operation only six months of the year.¹⁵ Nevertheless a government publication of 1883 listed the Falls-Neuse mill as the largest producer of paper in the state with a capacity on one ton every twelve hours of operation.¹⁶ By the late 1880s Askew had put his mill into continuous operation and had gained recognition as a producer of quality paper. Rag paper had been produced in North Carolina as early as 1777. As Guion Johnson states in Ante-Bellum North Carolina, "Although the manufacture of paper from rags was a more expensive process than from straw fiber, ground wool, or chemical wood, it made a more durable product."¹⁷

The paper produced at Falls of the Neuse was used for books, newsprint, government printing, and wrapping. Askew supplied nearly all the newspapers in eastern North Carolina as well as the printing office of the state government.¹⁸ The process utilized at Askew's mill was described by Joesphus Daniels, well-known Raleigh editor, who paid a visit to the mill in 1887.

"It is interesting," he wrote, "to see the rag pickers begin to separate the good from the bad; the rag cutter and duster making the good still better; the tremendous rotating boiler in which the rags are steamed and started on the cleaning process; the washers which take up and continue the cleaning; the converting of rags into cotton; the carrying the converted rags--cleansed--into the perfect (Fourdiner) machine and the turning out of the purest white paper, at the rate of 3000 pounds in 18 hours."¹⁹

The mill was finally operating at full capacity with two twelve-hour shifts at work. Twenty men and women were employed, with men paid from \$.50 to \$2 a day and women from \$.40 to \$.50 a day.

According to Daniels the mill at the Falls "is the only place east of Charlotte where paper is made in the State, and no better paper is made anywhere, as the readers of the (State Chronicle) can testify."²⁰ Daniels was equally lavish in his praise of William F. Askew. In his autobiography Daniels recalled that

"[Askew] had given me credit when I needed it and in assuming editorship of the State Chronicle I continued to buy paper made of rags from the same mill. A newspaper printed on rag paper is both

beautiful and durable. [Askew] invited me to pay a visit to the mill and see the processes of converting rag to paper. It was a beautiful location and Colonel Askew took pride in the operation of his mill . . . He was a man of remarkable vitality and an interesting talker, and I enjoyed his stories."²¹

After Askew died in November, 1887, supervision of the mill passed to his son, James Askew, and his son-in-law, J. Newtyon Holding. In 1890 the Falls of the Neuse Company announced the purchase of new pulp machines and the expectation of making "paper cheaper than any mills north of Mason's and Dixon's line."²² The corporation operating the mills was reorganized under the Raleigh Paper Company. For the next six years the company enjoyed moderate success until the fall of 1896 when a flood wrecked the plant. Two floors collapsed and the machinery was ruined. The Raleigh Paper Company went into receivership. The building was bought in 1899 by Charles Latta who organized the Neuse River Manufacturing Company. The building was remodeled to process cotton and manufacture white sheetings and bed ticking.²³

The demands of new machinery and new processes were too great for the water power developed at the Falls. Even in the days simpler technology the water power was not always reliable. A report of 1899 issued by the North Carolina Geological Survey stated that "the power used is said to be 300 horsepower, but it is evident that this power can only be obtained during eight or nine months of the year."²⁴ Latta supplemented the water power with steam engines. He operated the mill with some success until he was killed in a subway accident in New York in 1912.

In 1959 Erwin Mills suspended operations at Plant #7. One reason given for the shutdown was that the old granite structure would not yield for easy expansion of the plant.²⁷ The Falls-Neuse property, which consisted of two original granite buildings as well as newer brick mill buildings and warehouses, was purchased by W. W. Holding and Company and is now used as a cotton warehouse.

FOOTNOTES

¹Hugh T. Lefler (ed.), Lawson's A Voyage to Carolina, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 64. Lefler notes that Lawson is referring to Falls of the Neuse in Wake County.

²Crosswell, Jack, "Plant Site Has Colorful History," News and Observer (Raleigh), March 30, 1959.

³Private Laws of North Carolina, 1850-1851, 573.

⁴Charles E. Johnson to J. H. Bryan, January 21, 1858, J. H. Bryan Papers, East Carolina University Library (Johnson was involved in a lawsuit against Jordan and Company charging that the machinery and other property of the Manteo Manufacturing Company had been illegally transferred to Falls of the Neuse. His letters to Bryan document a complex series of ownership changes during the 1850s. There is no record of the outcome of Johnson's suit.)

⁵Raleigh Register, September 27, 1854.

⁶Raleigh Register, December 12, 1855; see State Chronicle (Raleigh), April 28, 1887 for description of the dam.

⁷Private Laws of North Carolina, 1856-1857, chapter 57, 24-25; Wake County Deed Books, Office of the Register of Deeds, Wake County Courthouse, Raleigh, Deed Book 21, 637-638, hereinafter cited as Wake Deed Books.

⁸Eighth Census of the United States, 1860: Wake County, North Carolina, Industrial Schedule, 2, microfilm of National Archives manuscript copy, State Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina. It is of interest that of those seeking employment at the paper mill, one was Cornelius Edwards, later of Edwards and Broughton, the leading publishing house of Raleigh. Edwards was unsuccessful in his application at Falls-Neuse and was forced to move on to Milburnie. See G. W. Paschal, History of Printing in North Carolina, (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1946), 147.

⁹Hope Chamberlain, History of Wake County, (Raleigh: Branson and Jones, 1867).

¹⁰Branson's North Carolina Business Directory (Raleigh: Branson and Jones, 1867), 107.

¹¹Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: Wake County, North Carolina, Industrial Schedule, microfilm of National Archives Manuscript copy, State Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

¹²Wake County Deed Book 32, 250.

¹³Wake County Deed Book 33, 387-388.

¹⁴For evidence of McAden's and Swepson's involvement in the paper mill, see also Wake County Deed Book 70, 556 and biographical sketch of McAden in Samuel Ashe and others (eds.) Biographical History of North Carolina: From Colonial Times to the Present (Greensboro: Charles L. Van Noppen, 8 volumes, 1905-1917), volume 5, 198.

¹⁵Tenth Census of the United States, 1880: Wake County, North Carolina, Industrial Schedule, microfilm of National Archives manuscript copy, State Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

¹⁶Leonidas Polk (ed.), Handbook of North Carolina (Raleigh: North Carolina Board of Agriculture, 1883) 121.

¹⁷Guion G. Johnson, Ante-Bellum North Carolina (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937) 775-776.

¹⁸Crosswell, op. cit..

¹⁹State Chronicle (Raleigh) April 28, 1887.

²⁰Ibid. Daniels commented on the difference in pay between men and women as follows: "It is a crying shame. Here (Falls-Neuse) their work is different and lighter than that performed by men. When this is the case, they don't expect the same pay. It is against the inequality in wages when there is equality in labor that I protest."

²¹Josephus Daniel, Tar Heel Editor (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939) 249-252.

²²State Chronicle (Raleigh) November 17, 1887; Asheville Democrat, June 19, 1890.

²³Crosswell, op. cit.. News & Observer (Raleigh) March 28, 1897.

²⁴Joseph A. Holmes (ed.), "Waterpowers of North Carolina," North Carolina Geological Survey, Bulletin 8, 122-123; Wake County Deed Book 154, 134-136.

²⁵Crosswell, op. cit..

²⁶Employment Security Commission Quarterly, Summer-Fall, 1952, 103-105.

²⁷Crosswell, op. cit..

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